

**U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom
Hearing on Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Iran
January 26, 2023**

Statement by "Jane Doe"

I am an Iranian Christian who resettled to the United States as a refugee through the Lautenberg Program. My family and I faced many obstacles in the six painful years we were stranded in Austria waiting for our applications to be approved. It is essential that the Lautenberg Program remain a pathway for religious minorities to escape persecution in Iran in the future.

In Iran, my family and I faced discrimination from the Islamic Republic government for being Christian. The government security and religious police broke the windows of my husband's restaurant many times, and we were falsely accused of selling unclean products in front of our customers. We were also cast off from society. At my job as a Secretary, I was forced to eat alone because my colleagues believed I would contaminate their food. At public clinics I was refused medical treatment because of my religion. The situation got worse once I had my daughter, who I knew would grow up in a gender segregated environment there. I feared that she would suffer without her father being present for many occasions in her life like I had as a child.

In 2014, my husband, daughter, parents, and I applied to leave Iran through the Lautenberg Program in the hopes of joining relatives in the United States who sponsored our applications. I understood the Lautenberg Program to be a pathway to safety for religious minorities in Iran who, like me, face persecution because of their religion. My husband and I wanted to raise our young daughter with traditional Christian values and believed that in the United States we would have the freedom to practice our religion.

In 2016, my family received visas to travel to Vienna, Austria to complete processing of our applications. We believed that we had been preliminarily approved to come to the United States and would only spend a few short months in Vienna to finish the final processing steps, just like many others in our family and community had done before. Before leaving Iran, we gave away our apartment and sold all our appliances, although we were too scared to tell anyone that we were fleeing to America.

Once in Vienna, I underwent a routine interview with U.S. government officials about my application and we successfully completed our medical checks. In the spring of 2017, we were given approval letters and plane tickets to the U.S. We had already given up our apartment in Vienna and were eagerly on our way to the airport when we got a call that our flight was canceled. We returned to our building and slept on the hallway floor with people walking past us. We went to the program office the next day to ask what happened and how soon we could be booked on another flight, but they did not have any answers for us.

After months more of waiting in Vienna with no progress or explanation, we were told that my parents could go to the United States sooner if we separated our cases. As an only child, I wanted desperately to be there to care for my parents. We were afraid to be separated and didn't know

whether we would ever be able to see each other again. Despite our concerns, we agreed, and my parents were resettled to southern California.

Then, in February 2018, I received a letter from the U.S. government denying my application without giving a reason. Close to 100 other Iranian Lautenberg applicants in Vienna received similar denials at the same time. We were later told that our applications were denied because of national security, which did not make any sense to us.

We were devastated, and the time that we spent waiting in Vienna—six years in total—was very painful. Our short visa to Austria expired, leaving us without permission to work, proper health insurance, or source of financial support for ourselves and our daughter. We were warned to stay at home or risk being arrested and deported to Iran, and had to apply for asylum in Austria after the United States turned its back on us.

The International Refugee Assistance Project filed a lawsuit about the changes to the Lautenberg Program that led to the denials of this group in Vienna. Under a settlement agreement reached in 2022, our cases were all reviewed again by the U.S. government under fair security standards. My husband, daughter, and I were finally re-approved, along with many others in Vienna, and we joined our family in the United States in December 2022.

Now that we are together again, it is bittersweet to reflect on what we lost during the years apart. My parents have aged, and I am overcome with emotion when I think of the hardships they endured without us to support them. I had secured a job in the United States when I was first scheduled to travel, and while I kept the offer alive for some time afterwards eventually it disappeared. We feel very happy to be reunited but the trauma and despair of our journey remains with all of us who were stranded for so long.

It is critically important that the Lautenberg Program continue to allow families to resettle together to the United States, without having to suffer through six years of heartache like we did. My hope is that it can once again be a strong program that provides Iranian religious minorities with a meaningful opportunity to escape persecution in the United States.